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Woodworker's Brush With CIA Began and Ended in Mystery

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Frederick L. Wall decided that his woodworking career should take a new turn. Tired of installing cabinets in other people's homes, he had just completed a larger-than-life mahogany-and-oak gasoline pump, a piece of contemporary sculpture that featured a trap door concealing a liquor cabinet within.

The phone rang in the drafty converted barn that serves as his studio in Herndon.

"Don't be alarmed," a woman's voice said, "but this is the CIA calling. We'd like you to do some work for us."

Wall's first thought was that he would be asked to build a new chair or conference table for the CIA director's office, since the voice mentioned that the intelligence agency knew of his interest in fine furniture. Wall, an instructor in sculpture at the Corcoran School of Art, thought he might be interested in that. But he was determined to resist traditional carpentry work, which he had done for the government before.

The voice said he didn't understand—the CIA wanted him to work for them full time. Think about it, she said. And call us back.

Wall did, and he is still thinking about the day the Central Intelligence Agency telephoned out of the blue to invite him to join it for the design and manufacture of secret compartments and clandestine drawers, and to travel overseas to put his exotic creations into place under the cover of a false identity.

The CIA, with thousands of employees, routinely recruits new staff members. But for Rick Wall what

followed was not routine, but something out of a spy novel in which he, for a time, was the central figure.

Wall, now 36, reconstructed his experience to the best of his memory, leaving the names out—he says he has forgotten them. It occurred three years ago, when the Reagan

administration began an effort to strengthen the agency. The CIA declined to comment on his story, but an agency official described his experience as "pretty much in line with what happens." Wall said he would have respected any request, however implied, for confidentiality. No such request was ever made, he said.

"The first thing I did after the woman called me," he recounted in a recent interview, "was to call my wife and tell her about it, since they hadn't told me not to."

His impulse was to simply forget the offer, but Judy Wall and several of his friends wouldn't hear of it. A phone call from the CIA that began "Don't be alarmed" was entirely too intriguing to ignore, they said; he should at least find out what the intelligence agency had to offer.

So Wall asked to hear more, and in a few days he received a letter—on plain white paper with no letterhead—confirming an interview at a Navy facility on C Street NW.

"I was shown to a small conference room and two men walked in. I had brought along pictures of some 18th century furniture restorations I'd done, and the men seemed to be able to discern that it was good stuff. I showed them the picture of the gasoline pump, and they liked that, too."

The interview began to "live up to my expectations," he said, as soon as the men began asking him questions.

"Well, we see you can do fine quality work," one said. "Do you

think that you could also do less than fine quality work?"

Wall allowed that he could—but why would he?

"Because sometimes you might be asked to make something of a lesser quality to be compatible with something else," he was told.

"Let's say we have a person helpful to us—maybe he's a peasant, for example—and he would need a bookshelf typical of a person of his means. And then this bookshelf you'd make might need a place in it where documents could be hidden."

The evening after the first telephone call, a phrase kept popping up in his imagination.

Now, as he listened to the men, he thought of it again: "spy furniture."

"Or," one of the interviewers went on, "we might supply you with a photograph of some kind of furnishing, and then from the picture you could make something that was compatible with it."

The two men were very friendly and relaxed, Wall said. "One was in his late 40s, a little overweight but jovial. The other was slender, with a sort of Brylcreem look. They had a contagious enthusiasm.

"But every time they described several types of things I'd be making—like a chair with a hollow leg—they would sort of stop themselves, and say, 'But of course, we are not a James Bond-type organization.' They said that several times."

Wall, intrigued, asked where he would work, and how he would get assignments.

"For instance," one of the men said, "we might just give you a problem to solve, as a project. We might say, one of our departments has designed an electrical device—now what can you build to put it in?"

Wall was informed that a fully equipped shop facility would be made available to him. He asked if

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